



Art Nouveau Healthy Buildings in Tbilisi

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Fall of the Byzantine Empire made Georgia, an ancient Christian country, lose close contacts with Europe for several centuries. Having grown weak after permanent defensive wars, in 1801 Georgia joined to Russia. Due to strong and developed historical status of the country in the Caucasus, as well as its suitable geographical location Georgia became the political-administrative center of Transcaucasia, the southern part of the Russian Empire. For centuries Georgia was known as strategic area and the crossroads of main trade trails joining Europe with Asia and if this was the very reason of its frequent ravage and destruction, this time the same fact contributed to its economical development and cultural progress. The main part in the process played the Black Sea, which was the shortest way from Europe to the Mediterranean countries.

Development of the country resulted in growth of the population and consequently, increase of constructions. However, the nation that had had rich building experience and architectural traditions found itself facing great difficulties: imperial politics demanded the construction process to be subjected only to the projects developed in advance. It meant that only the buildings of so called “Russian Classicism” could be built. It was really hard to be protected from the invasion of foreign culture. However, in housing architecture, where the demands and control of governmental institutions were not so strong, rather important fact took place – with the efforts of local population, builders and skilled workers the apartment houses acquired foreign forms but at the same time, taking into consideration the traditions and way of life, developed and established completely new architectural style which resembled the blend of “Russian Classicism” and Georgian traditional elements. It was an urban apartment house with balconies as the main element of façade.

In the second half of the XIXth century under European influence the buildings with eclectic facades became prevalent in Georgia as well. Urban houses with wooden balconies were substituted with eclectic style buildings without or with iron balconies. One should pay attention to skillfully executed décor showing high qualification of the craftsmen. Because of late capitalism and weak economy in Georgia the art of skilled workers and craftsmen was used for a longer period of time compared with Europe. These workers according to their qualifications used to join to different guilds of craftspeople called *amqari*. Because of the intensity of building process and growth of demand for skilled workers those guilds for building business existed especially for a long time, up to the 20th of XX century. William Morris, alarmed with the modern industrialization in the middle of XIX century, just would have dreamed of the situation which existed in Georgia at that time.

The new style established in Europe by the late 19th century went under various names in the world – Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, Secession etc. We call this style Modern in Georgia, Information about Art Nouveau arrived in Georgia from Russia and Europe via the shortest route - the Black Sea. Art Nouveau expanded rapidly through different kind

of publications: professional, popular and fashion magazines, and photos and people who came to work or to study in the country.

Numerous Modern constructions and archival rich material are preserved in different cities of Georgia up to now. Unfortunately, only the material kept in Tbilisi is studied though not completely. Anyway, it is quite enough to admit that a lot of projects of Art Nouveau buildings having different functions were created in Georgia.

In Georgia Art Nouveau buildings were constructed as in the capital city as in many small towns: Sokhumi, Batumi. Poti, Kutaisi, Gagra, Akhali Atoni, Kobuleti, Dusheti. The first three were ports, the fourth – industrial town, the following three – resorts. But Dusheti, a small administrative center of a mountainous region in eastern Georgia, with its Art Nouveau style buildings proves that this style really was very popular in our country.

In Tbilisi various international and regional exhibitions were often held. In the exhibition of 1901 dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the reunification of Georgia with Russia, art nouveau building showed up for the first time. The Nobel brother's community pavilion which was adorned with Jacob Nikoladze's sculptures. Unfortunately, the building does not exist anymore.

We should take it into consideration that Georgian professional specialists and craftsman enriched international Art Nouveau by adding national and traditional elements. There are wooden balconies hanging on the back elevations of the apartment houses - best sample of the coexistence of European and traditional and interesting feature of the Georgian Art Nouveau.

A European, eclectic building having Art Nouveau details is a common phenomenon in itself, but when 19th century Tbilisi traditional apartment houses in the oldest district bear Art Nouveau constructive or decorative elements it shows another important distinctive feature of our Art Nouveau.

The style was so popular in our capital that it was used not only in the construction of new buildings but also in reconstructions. The former Artstruni caravanserai can be considered one of the best reconstructions Art Nouveau and a unique phenomenon in general. The building was built in the 17th c. but destroyed and rebuilt many times. Finally, in 1912 it was adorned with the Art Nouveau façade.

In addition to apartment blocks, Art Nouveau was used in many other places: banks, colleges, shops, movie theaters, hospitals, workshops, canteens and factories. It should be mentioned that Tbilisi has a thermal power plant, which is being destroyed by the owner and Tobacco factory. Poti, small city in west Georgia has library and Carriage parking. Wonderful memorial monuments are preserved in historical cemeteries too.

The most significant are Art Nouveau style movie theaters. The arrival and then spreading of Art Nouveau and cinema took place simultaneously and the coincidental success of these two innovations is very important in Georgia. A good example of this is cinema "Apollo", an Art Nouveau movie theatre built in 1909. Today it is in grave technical condition and is not functioning anymore. The movie theatre "Palace" is not operational today either. It was built in Tbilisi in 1914 and only the entrance hall and small fragments of the facade are preserved up to the present. In the middle of the 20th century the movie theaters "Mon Plaisir" in Kutaisi and "Apollo" in Batumi were destroyed. Therefore in Georgia only "Apollo" has been preserved in its original form.

Art Nouveau introduced and applied modern building materials, methods, technologies and initiated completely new, complex engineering and constructional solutions in architecture, which is clearly expressed in Art Nouveau style buildings of the banks in the country.

Beside old projects we have searched for some photos of Art Nouveau buildings in the archives. It is significant that most of these buildings are preserved.

As regards the main subject of our topic two Art Nouveau healthful buildings are preserved in Tbilisi: built in 1912 former “Olga’s Obstetric Institute” and one of the buildings of the first commercial hospital, which belongs to the 10th of XX century.

Since 1873 there was a maternity hospital at the place of former “Olga’s Obstetric Institute.” In 1912 with the support of Olga, the sister of the Russian Empire’s last king Nikolai II, the old building was substituted by a new, larger and more comfortable obstetric institute. This building has the same function today.

The author of the building is a Tbilisi’s famous architect, Alexandr Rogoiski. He made a project of another wonderful Art Nouveau building in Tbilisi. It is a former Economical Society House of Caucasian Officers (1913), which today belongs to TBC Bank.

The building that overlooks the street bearing the name of Olga is four-storied. Because of the relief it looks three-storied from the yard and the ground floor serves as a basement. The central part of the façade facing the street is distinguished with two bay windows and elevated parapet. The central part of the main entrance façade is also accented – two-graded projection differs from the rest of the walls by décor and parapet. The three facades of the institute are plastered and laid out with plain and geometrical décor of Art Nouveau style. The plaster on the fourth façade is so thin that one can easily notice the brick order. The paint used on the wall is brick-red as well.

The institute lengthens deep into the yard and has a prolonged rectangular shape with wings at both ends. We enter the yard from the street and the main entrance with a wooden door and stone staircase is at the same façade. The cast iron roof over the door is standing on metal corbels. The entrance is adorned with mosaic floor and metal railed staircase. The floors are about 5 meters high with large rooms and high openings. In the interior the wide halls are adorned with mosaic. And spacious metal railed stairs. It should be mentioned that there are only one fragment of original rail of stairs.

“Restoration” of this building is permanently taking place. Both facades overlooking the central street have been already “renovated.” The interior is being restored at the moment. In the corner of one of the wings of the façade facing the yard a new glazed construction of full-height has been attached.

According to customers’ or builder’s tastes, without any proper laboratory researches the plastered facades have been renovated with cement lining and new paint; the metal details have been coated. A lot of authentic details were lost. The original wooden window and door frames were substituted with metallic-plastic ones, and the iron grates and gate completely disappeared. Renovation work is going to start in the backyard, where the original windows and doors are still preserved.

The story of this building is the best evidence of the sad reality concerning the protection of monuments in Georgia.

The other Art Nouveau healthful building belongs to former first commercial hospital. Now it houses Dental Department and Clinic of Tbilisi State University. This building is a part of the group constructions situated in two parallel streets. Building process of these constructions began in the 60th of XIX century in so called German district. The main

building was constructed in 1868 according to the project of the German architect Albert Zaltsman (1833-1897). He was a descendant of the Germans who settled in Georgia in the early XIX century.

It was the first chargeable hospital and hence comes its name. Being rather expensive only well-off people could afford it. During the years the number of buildings grew, therefore, extended its profile. A medical attendant school was situated here as well. In October 18, 1881 in honour of name day of king Nikolai's son, the governor Mikhail, the hospital was given his name. The Art Nouveau style building we are interested in belongs to this hospital as well. Unfortunately, the architect of the building as well as its original function and generally its history is unknown to us yet. But we know that in the Soviet Union and even now all other buildings as well as this one have medical function.

The main entrance and the lengthwise openings and wall of the three-storied brick building, which is not plastered, are made in Art Nouveau style. Along the rest perimeter of the façade the right-angled windows are rhythmically situated. There is only one hanging metal balcony on the second floor of the façade. The side facades are characterized with non-rhythmical openings of less number. The back façade is significant with its decorative wooden, glassed-in balconies on the second and third floors. The half of the building is larger and cuts deep in the yard with the wooden stairs at the end, which with openings faces a spacious yard.

The stairs and the floor of the main entrance are decorated with mosaic. The stairs have metal tracery railing. The building planning is the same on all three floors: a wide hall with the rooms on both sides. The daylight comes into the hall by means of the window on the side façade. The foundation was fortified 40 years ago. During the fire ten years ago the wooden stairs facing the yard and one part of the third floor above it was burnt down. According to the owner of the building no fortification or restoration is planned.

In Georgia Art Nouveau was spread not only in architecture. In this regard our poetry and literature, publishing, light industry, applied, decorative and fine arts need in-depth study. I am presenting two visiting cards made in Art Nouveau belonging to the photographers from Tbilisi and Batumi, music of Georgian dances, and the cover of the Georgian translation of Georgian's favourite German poet, Heinrich Heine's poems published in 1913.

According to the researched material it is evident that in spite of colonialism a long-term peaceful period and restored cultural-economical relationship with Europe in XIX the country contributed to establishment and spread of the most popular, progressive and modern style of that time - Art Nouveau architecture.

Unfortunately, a lot of Art Nouveau works disappeared and many of them are being destroyed. I will present you the buildings or their details that are damaged, and the samples which do not exist anymore.

At the end of this lecture let me present the collage of Art Nouveau samples in Georgia accompanied by the music of a contemporary Georgian composers – Bidzina Kvernadze and Gia Kancheli.